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BLIND SIGHT.

BY COLONEL CHARLES WILLIAM LARNED, UNITED STATES MILITARY
ACADEMY.

IN the sixth book of the "Republic" of Plato, Socrates, in his colloquy with Glaucon and Adeimantus upon the Beautiful and the Good, observes:

"But have you remarked that sight is by far the most costly and complex piece of workmanship which the artificer of the senses ever contrived? . . . Sight being, as I conceive, in the eyes, and he who has eyes wanting to see, color being also present in them; still, unless there be a third nature specially adapted to the purpose, the owner of the eyes will see nothing, and the colors will be invisible."

Although the "third nature" of which Socrates makes mention is Light, and the purpose of his discourse is to bring out the analogy between Light and Truth, between the Eye and the Soul, I shall take the liberty of reading another interpretation into the term, and of maintaining that the "third nature" specially adapted to the purpose of true vision is Reflection; and that from habitual lack of conscious reflective vision the majority of mankind are disdaining and dishonoring their noblest faculty.

"Blind sight" is a term I employ to designate a malady that is especially characteristic of man in general as a highly civilized being, and in proportion as he recedes from a nomadic and aboriginal state. It is an attribute of the mechanical and artificial environment in which we live; of our intense subjectivity; of our minute and narrowing specialization; of our physical deterioration; of our preoccupation; of our indifference to that which is not immediately concerned with our activities . . . of our overwork. It is also due, and under these tendencies mainly due, to the inefficiency of education which fails to train synthetically the sense organs and to endow men with expert facul-

ties of perception. Sense training should be the first, most thorough and persistent labor exacted in primary and secondary education. The faculties of sight, of hearing, of touch, of smell, of taste, should all be developed to refinement, and every youth should possess these organs of sense and their attendant faculties as perfected tools with which to enter upon his career of development as an intelligent member of society. Some day when education shall have taken on a rational and coherent form, it will appear pathetically absurd that so many centuries of laborious servitude at the treadmill of schooling exacted of childhood and youth should have been barren of results in any way commensurate with the toil, the physical and nervous energy expended.

Blind sight means specifically the suppression of the faculty of conscious vision; the gradual atrophy of visual perception as an act of discriminating observation. It means that the camera of the eye is focussing countless pictures—of beauty; of interest; of perhaps vital importance in potential result, if noticed; of delight, if intelligently considered—upon sensitive films that are never developed. The reagents—*apprehension, comparison, judgment, reflection*—do not act; the image is not fixed upon the consciousness and filed away by the memory for future reference: and the man's intelligence is so much the poorer; his nature so much the more meagre; his range of sympathy so much the more restricted and barren, for the neglect of the bounties of God's supreme gift of vision.

Unconscious or slovenly sight exists in all degrees of development. With most it is a habit resulting from neglect. Indolent indifference to the features of the objective panorama becomes habitual and fixed, so that the conscious attention is asleep and does not act unless aroused by some special exciting cause. It is more or less a case of blind stare like that of the philosophers of Laputa who were attended by bladder-carriers to rap them over the head whenever it was necessary for them to take notice of their environment. The pity of it is that the opposite habit of conscious, attentive vision is readily cultivable and quickly responds to treatment, especially in childhood and youth.

Alas! for the weary little jailbirds of the schoolhouse who serve their terms in chain gangs in the ill-ventilated penitentiaries of the mighty Juggernaut of the text-book; conning conventions from the dirty pages; crammed with *a priori* formulas and for-

malism and the diluted pap of the sophistry of the ages; but forbidden the free use of their faculties, and tied to the car until the natural impulse of independent observation and reflection has gone to sleep, perhaps forever! What if Nature and the objective world had been the first and chief text-book, and the teacher the interpreter and guide developing the faculties, stimulating observations, encouraging inquiry and initiative—being himself the medium of translation of formulas, philosophy and art in terms of visible and tangible fact, until the machinery of thought operates smoothly under the impulse of the natural forces of living inquiry and interest? Under such conditions, would school for the most of us have seemed a dismal drudgery; college a dull cram; and life a patchwork of arbitrary and stupid conventions, accepted without thought or discrimination?

Dear Average Man, consider with me what immeasurable opportunities elude our grasp; what a wealth of delightful, intelligent perception is lost to us; what a mass of valuable reminiscence and reference matter is missing from our stores; what a world of sympathetic understanding is absent from our comprehension; what “oodles” of fun escapes us—all through the lack of vigorous habits of observation and refined organs of sense. Why should we sell our birthright of acute sense perception for a mess of mechanical inactivities and a pulpy life of automatism? Why are we becoming more and more parasitic and morbid in our art; more sophisticated and self-conscious in our literature; less spontaneous and sincere in our social relations; less clairvoyant in our perceptions of Nature and of the natural man? Is it not mainly because we no longer see with the natural eye nor observe with the reflective brain? We take our observation at second hand out of books or newspapers, even of things under our noses, just as we take our notions of art from histories of art and the deliverances of our Ruskins, our Taines, our Wincklemanns and our Ham-mertons; just as we swallow open-mouthed our literary standards from literary compendiums and essayists, or are plundered of them and all the rest of our inherited conventions and beliefs by such critical Knights of the Jolly Roger as Baudelaire, Stirner, Stendhal, Nietzsche, Shaw and the rest, the bladder-carriers of our Laputa.

As we are forfeiting the power of clear and independent visual observation by disuse and the atrophy of these faculties, so we are

losing the power of vigorous and individual judgment by relying upon others to do our thinking, and in our mental vision looking through other eyes than our own. We are awake; we hear; we read; we talk; we fancy we think, but it is only mental blind sight. By and by all our thinking will be done for us by thought syndicates; and in science, art, literature and politics, opinion will be officially determined by specialists and left at our doors with the morning paper. In religion we fancy we are independent, but it is only indifference. If we are not orthodox we accept our liberalism, our atheism, our agnosticism or our paganism at the hands of the higher and supercritics, the scientific rationalists or the classical culturists, because we are too lazy or too busy to think for ourselves. Even for vision of the objective world we will rely, in the new automatic existence, mainly upon moving pictures prepared in France and accompanied by phonographic dialogue.

It may be that we are not far from these conditions at the present moment; that in the midst of our vast and rapidly growing urban population we are rearing a race of men who hardly ever look upon the face of nature, and never with recognition; slaves of the machine and treadmill, whose opinions of men and affairs, such as they are, are moulded by the yellow sheet of crime; and whose vision of Truth rises not from a well, but from a sewer. The smattering education given by a great deal of our public-school instruction by the formal and *a priori* method of the average text-book does not suffice to give fixed ideals, or definite concepts, or exact habits of thought; it does not even teach how to study. It flutters over the surface of elementary information and leaves the child and youth possessed of disconnected clots of confused impressions. Had it taught them to use their eyes, their ears, their tongues, their fingers, to think clearly about a few things, and to know some elementary facts thoroughly, no matter how limited the range, it would have been well worth while, whether the child left the primary, the secondary or the high-grade years. To be able to see and observe—that alone is a talent more to be desired than knowledge of many books. But surely ours is the case of that people of whom it was written: “By hearing ye shall hear, and shall in no wise understand, and seeing ye shall see, and shall in no wise perceive.”

Let us consider a common instance of heedless vision, such as is habitual with the modern burgher who is "autoed" through a high-pressure round of commercial activities by an ever-increasing variety of mechanical substitutes for physical and mental effort; who never uses his eyes with vigorous attention, except in dodging auto-cars; and whose visual range of the natural universe for ten months or more of the year is a narrow streak of smoky sky at the top of a hideous architectural cañon. You, average reader, are the man. You attend a social function where you meet and talk with an interesting stranger for the better part of an evening upon topics of common interest. You part, and a few days later learn that you had been talking with the famous Mr. Nemo of Utopia. You struggle to recall, for the benefit of your wife, his personal appearance—his physical "accidents"—but you find that you have been staring at him in a conversational way for an hour without seeing him. He has been simply a mouth and a voice. If he had worn green hair, like Baudelaire, a glass eye and a false nose, your only consciousness of it would have been a vague notion that there was something queer about him.

He had lost his left ear in the arctic regions, you had not observed it; his right arm in the Transvaal, it had escaped your attention; he wore a red, white and blue striped waitscoat, you were not sure of the colors, but had an impression that his dress was peculiar; one leg of his trousers might have been scarlet and the other blue, you did not specially notice; you could not recall whether he wore a dressing-gown or a bathing-suit, but you were aware that there was something unusual about him and let it go at that. You did remember that he used an ear-trumpet, because it bored you to talk through it; and that his breath smelled of onions, because they make you sick. Further than that you cannot go with positiveness, and call upon your friend Holmes a few days after for descriptive assistance, which he renders with delightful accuracy and detail and which you wonder at and envy. In a similar state of somnambulism you take a walk through the land either alone or in company. If alone, you are thinking; if with company, talking, and your eyes are turned inwards. Certain interesting events of public importance had taken place under your nose, and you are chagrined to find that you are entirely worthless as a source of information regarding

them to yourself or others. Interrogated about persons, localities and details, you can render no coherent description thereof—you “didn’t notice.” Moreover, concerning objects and localities with which you have been familiar for years, you cannot give accurate account. Your case is that of ninety-five out of every hundred of your neighbors. As a matter of fact, I doubt if one man in every hundred has the habit of conscious vision—or, in other words, habitually observes.

But in reply I hear a chorus of curt protest: “What of it? We are no longer aborigines. We do not stalk our food and skulk in fear of ambush. We are no longer dependent for sustenance and hourly safety upon keen vision and habits of minute observation. In our advanced civilization we do not need to bother our heads with objective detail. Are we all to become Sherlock Holmeses and occupy ourselves with a perpetual inventory of detective details when we converse with our friends or walk abroad? Is it of any consequence to me, when I commune on politics or immortality or small beer, that my friend wears a wig, a red necktie, a glass eye and twiddles his thumbs? Am I to concern myself in my morning walks because my neighbor has three gables and four dormers on his roof and a broken door on his woodshed? Must I be always platting topographic maps of my surroundings and scanning the stupid crowd about me for fear lest I may be the centre of an unobserved tragedy or historic episode? Does not the prevalence of heedless vision go to show that man has advanced to a higher plane of development where the eye of the hawk and of the mountain-goat is no longer an essential to safe and satisfactory existence?”

To which I make categorical reply: The prevalence of heedless vision, my somnambulant brother, does *not* go to show our independence of precise and intelligent observation, any more than the prevalence of astigmatism and near-sightedness goes to show that sound eyes are a matter of indifference. I am firmly convinced that we should be, as nearly as possible, Sherlock Holmeses in our powers and habits of observation; and the more so in proportion to the increase of specializing tendencies in our activities.

How your neighbor looks, what he wears and does, *is* of concern to you as a matter of human interest and may be of importance as a matter of fact; and that as many as possible of the

images which your eye is focussing upon your retina of the beauties and activities of the objective world of which you are a part shall be intelligently apprehended is of vital moment to your happiness, your understanding, your practical interests and your usefulness as a member of society. You never can be certain that the glass eye and the twiddling thumb will not, by some freak of circumstance, be your eye of destiny or the *pollice verso* of your undoing. Fortune and disaster often have turned upon more trivial determinants; and the broken woodshed door in the next yard is as like to be the gateway of your triumph as the portals of the millionaire magnate to whom you reverently kowtow. Always and everywhere it is the keen observer—the man of the conscious eye that notices—who achieves and arrives.

The master observer of modern time, the protagonist of scrutinizers, was the sagacious and versatile Franklin. Ever on the alert to note, compare, reflect, deduce—nothing escapes his clear, conscious gaze. He was always master of circumstances and of conditions; always self-poised; ever controlling affairs through first-hand observation of phenomena and of men. His eye is always awake. He is incarnate attention; and, as most of the world is asleep most of the time, he and all other Franklins, great and small, are the bell-wethers of their times.

Franklin is the antithesis of the intellectuals of the schools. Everything he does or says has the freshness of originality; the aroma of Nature instead of books; the objective, and not the subjective, flavor. He, the homely son of the tallow chandler and “sope-boiler,” walking up Market Street to his destiny, with his pockets stuffed out with soiled underwear and his soul in his eyes; this inquisitive vagabond of science; this homespun, wary diplomat; this pervasive eye—dazzled and amazed men of every school of learning who, with one accord, acclaimed him master.

His prophetic and comprehensive insight into ultimate causes of scientific phenomena is always voiced in the simple phraseology of objective fact. It is the eye speaking. Whether speculating upon the luminiferous ether, the nature of the electric fluid, the properties of matter, the theory of earthquakes, the cause of smoky chimneys, or running with note-book in hand after a whirlwind, his thesis is written in the language of form. He is the man not only “diligent in business,” but in vision, who

stands before kings and the wise men of the earth. He "arrives" completely.

But aside from sordid or material advantages, how about the glories of infinite being around and above you; the procession of beauty, of life, of phenomena, of humanity, moving in endless variety of interest before your bovine stare while you chew the cud of the dull, apathetic ruminant? Franklin sympathized and enjoyed supremely also.

Here are the results of some simple tests made, with a view of ascertaining the acuteness of conscious vision, formal judgment and formal memory of a class of eighty-six young men. These results do not, of course, represent an average condition in this regard, since the test is, in the first place, a conscious one; and next, the men, whose ages ranged from twenty to twenty-three years, had had courses of technical graphics and topographical reconnaissance, and had been for two and a half years under the exacting discipline of the Military Academy which stimulates alertness and habits of accuracy. The tests, as I interpret them, gauge fairly well the effect of the habit of attentive or slovenly vision as a constant factor in the personal equation.

Nine geometrical blocks of wood, about fourteen inches in height and painted white, were placed on a dark table against a dark background and distinctly separated. These were screened by a curtain which was quickly raised and lowered at a signal. The class sat in seats ranged after the manner of those in a clinic. The table was strongly lighted from a large skylight. The curtain was raised about six seconds for exposure of the objects, and the test was for number and form.

Fifty-eight gave the correct number; eighteen, one less; three, one more; one, two more; one, three less. None correctly described the form of all; three described eight; eight described seven; twenty-seven, six; seventeen, five; sixteen, four; seven, three; two, two; one could describe none.

The man who could remember nothing of form probably exhausted his five seconds in the effort at enumeration. It will be observed that apprehension of number was much more generally accurate than judgment of form, which was to be expected. As to form, the bulk of the class, fifty-two, were able to discriminate between and remember from but four to six out of

nine in a glance of six seconds. But six seconds is a considerable period in which to concentrate the attention upon a few very bright and simple objects, such as a cube, cone, pyramid, etc.; and this, be it remembered, was an exceptional group of men trying to do their best.

The second test was for conscious, reflective observation, and was taken by eighty-three men. Two white blocks, rectangular in shape and somewhat larger than an octavo volume of medium size, were placed on a dark table, on one side of which was an instructor and on the other a group of five or six men. The instructor, using either his right or left hand, took one of the blocks and moved it with moderate quickness in three different positions with reference to the other—the movements taking about one second each to execute. The men were required to manipulate the blocks in the same manner and order.

Twenty-seven moved the block correctly; thirty-two used the wrong hand; thirteen made wrong movements; ten, wrong hand and movements; one placed the block incorrectly.

In this test, therefore, but one-third were accurate witnesses of a very simple operation carefully watched.

The third test was for partly unconscious observation, and is more interesting in this connection since it tends to show the actual state of the individual as regards his habit of blind sight. In the ordinary work of the class in the course of building construction, it had been sent to examine the structural detail of a simple building—a gun shed—with special reference to its working drawings. A few days later a set of ten observation questions was submitted for answer. “How many windows in the entire building and how located?” “How many bays in the building?” etc. Seventy-seven men took the test. One made over ninety per cent.; four, over eighty per cent.; five, over seventy per cent.; twenty, over sixty per cent.; nineteen, over fifty per cent.; fifteen, over forty per cent.; six, over thirty per cent.; five, over twenty per cent.; two, over ten per cent. In round numbers, about half the class remembered about half of the simple and conspicuous features of an object which they had been on a special trip to examine two days before; and six-sevenths remembered less than seventy per cent.

In another test for wholly unconscious observation but ten men out of eighty-three could recall the number of windows in an

academic room in which they had passed about three hundred hours during a year's attendance; and not one could describe their location or character with entire correctness. Fourteen could not answer simple questions regarding the physiognomy of their parents; and twenty-six failed similarly as to their roommates. One is irresistibly reminded of the oft-told but capital story of the professor of physics who undertook to demonstrate to his class the difference between *seeing* and *observing*. Taking a graduate-glass, he proceeded to fill it with a certain liquid. He then inserted a finger in the liquid and afterwards in his mouth. The students were requested to file past the table, accurately to repeat his action and return to their seats, which they did; each man receiving from his finger in restrained silence a horrible dose of asafœtida, which he was careful to see his successor should not miss. When the class had all resumed their seats with pallid faces and sinking stomachs, the professor, after scanning them sadly for a moment, remarked, with a weary smile: "Gentlemen, you did not *observe* that the finger I put in the graduate was not the finger I stuck in my mouth."

Any demonstration of the universality of this growing atrophy of attentive vision would be futile were the infirmity incurable or beyond prevention. But it is, on the contrary, easily prevented and cured. It is in almost every case an acquired habit which in childhood originates by reason of the absence in our civilization of the incentives to acute vision which are normal to the life of the human being as an active, self-sustaining animal; and it develops progressively as the subjective and artificial conditions of modern life assert their influence in general affairs. The child is a keener observer than the adult. The habit of attention and acute observation can be aroused by persistent effort and made natural and spontaneous. Pleasure in the stimulated vision, and the sense of vastly increased powers of observation, of broadened range, of new beauties, of heightened interest, will suffice to keep it alive and repay the effort.

The story of Houdin, and his marvellous development of visual acuteness and memory by practice, is well known; but an instance of a similar achievement in this country, through causes akin to those of nomadic life, was new to me when recently described by an eye-witness associated with the actors. A gentleman of the Corps of Cadets, whose home is in Texas and who has

lived of choice the cowboy life on his father's ranch, tells me that the herders become so expert in their scrutiny of cattle, so keen-eyed and observant, that in buying cattle on the hoof they often rely for enumeration upon a glance at the herd as they ride past; and that their passing estimate practically never varies more than two or three from the actual number in herds of from fifty to one hundred; and that in much larger herds, of from two to five hundred, their estimates will preserve the same proportion of accuracy. For instance, a buyer will say as he rides through a cattle-range, "I will take that herd of seventy-five; this of one hundred and fifty." Or, after a short scrutiny, he will assert, "You have five hundred head on that range over there." However, in buying a herd as large as this, they are usually strung out and counted, although the result rarely differs from the original estimate by more than two or three per cent. In some cases this ability to estimate is carried to a higher degree of accuracy even for very large herds. In the early seventies, before the day of weighing-scales and railroads, cattle-buyers in the Southwest would buy cattle at so much per hundredweight from their owners. This estimate of weight was based on what the cattle would weigh after they had been driven two, three or four hundred miles to the Kansas City market. Nevertheless, the error would amount to only a few pounds, not enough to affect their profits.

Charles Goodnight, of Goodnight, Texas, and owner of the famous buffalo herd bearing his name, related the following of a famous negro he knew. When the round-up time came, they would place this negro in an advantageous position and drive past him the herds belonging to different men. All these cattle, except the calves, had their owners' brands. Later, when these calves, after having been mixed up in the corral, were taken out to be branded, he could tell which brand to put on each from having noted at the time to which cow each belonged.

This astonishing acuteness is even more clearly demonstrated in their detection of diseased or defective animals in herds which they are inspecting for purchase. I am informed that in this discrimination they equally rely upon a rapid visual sweep of the cattle while grazing, the inspector merely riding through the herd. A sound herd is appraised as such and accepted at a glance; and, similarly, at a glance any deviation from uniform perfection is

remarked, and a demand for special examination is made on the spot. But this special examination is as astonishing in its expertness as the others. There is no dismounting for individual scrutiny. The herd is simply run past the purchaser at a gallop, and the defective heads are indicated with unerring certainty as they pass. These statements the narrator was at pains to substantiate by corroborative testimony from friends on the spot actively associated with the business of cattle-raising.

Let any one who is sceptical regarding my contention that observant vision, if cultivated in childhood, would be prolific of most important and far-reaching results in after-life, not alone in vastly increased mental acuteness, but in enhanced capacity for pleasure, a widened range of sympathy and a more profound insight into the life of Nature and Humanity—let such a doubter take himself in hand, and for a time each day divert the ruminative current of his thought from subjective to objective contemplation. Begin by a determination to observe your interlocutor, dear Average Man, upon all occasions. Endeavor to recall the details of physiognomy, of dress, of carriage, of habit both of friends and of casual acquaintances; finally, of passing strangers. From that pass to action and associations. Next, carry your range of visual acumen into Nature in your daily walks. Upon your return from your various excursions take a few moments for the preparation of a brief mental memoir and itinerary—develop your negative and file it. Presently your interest will be very much stimulated, and you will be considerably astonished not only at the enormous amount of significant matter that has hitherto wholly escaped you, but at your latent capacity to seize and retain it. Finally, you will discover that the old habit of blind-sight has departed; that in its place has developed the more natural and fruitful habit of live-sight; and that through the window of your soul there will flow a stream of living forms, facts and feelings to inhabit the treasure-house of your memory, instead of the train of pallid ghosts, vague and speechless, that vanished in oblivion and left behind only the damp and chilly residue of a fog.

CHARLES WILLIAM LARNED.